



## *Fire & Light*

### **St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 205-930-9681 / 205-907-9447

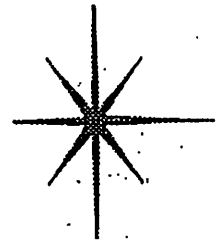
Visit [stsymeon.com](http://stsymeon.com)

**December 18, 2016**

**Sunday before the Nativity**

**The Holy Ancestors of Christ**

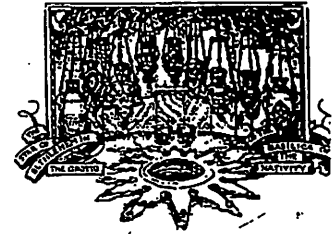
Martyr Sebastian at Rome (287)



Christ is born; glorify Him!  
Christ comes from heaven;  
Go to meet Him!  
Christ is on earth; be exalted!  
Sing to the Lord, all the earth!  
And praise Him in gladness,  
O people, for He has been  
glorified!

### **Next Sunday: The Feast of the Nativity According to the Flesh of Our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ**

- ✘ Royal Hours of the Nativity ~ Friday, December 23 ~ 10:00am
- ✘ Christmas Eve Holy Supper, December 24 ~ 3:00pm
- ✘ Nativity Eve Vigil ~ December 24 ~ 6:00pm
- ✘ Feast of the Nativity ~ Sunday Divine Liturgy ~ 10:00am
- ✘ Christmas Gathering at the Wells – Friday, December 30 ~ 6:00pm



### **Born of a Virgin Espoused**

“WHY is He [Christ] conceived not merely of a Virgin, but of a *Virgin espoused* (Luke 1:27)? First, that by the descent of Joseph, Mary’s family might be made known; secondly, that she might not be stoned by the Jews as an adulteress; thirdly, that in her flight into Egypt she might have the comfort of a husband. The Martyr Ignatius adds a fourth reason, namely that His birth might be hid from the devil, looking for Him to be born of a virgin and not of a wife” [see. Esaias 7:14].

St. Jerome of Stridonium, + 420 A.D.

### **With the Shepherds**

“THE ANGELS gave glory to God with the Shepherds. Why was such honor and glory granted to simple shepherds? Because of their simple-heartedness and their simple way of life, which Saint John Chrysostom likened to the life of Saint John the Forerunner, due to its severity and deprivations. They barely had a loaf of bread, and drank water from a spring when it was possible. In the Psalms it says, *He shall drink of the brook in the way; therefore shall He lift up His head* (Ps. 109:7). He who eats rich food and drinks expensive drinks cannot lift up his thoughts on high, but wanders and crawls on the earth.”

St. Ambrose of Optina, + 1891 A.D.

### **Not Necessary for us to know...**

“If the Lord has left us ignorant of the ordering of many things in this world, then it means it is not necessary for us to know: we cannot compass all creation with our minds. But the Creator Himself of heaven and earth and every created thing gives us to know Him in the Holy Spirit

St. Silouan the Athonite, +1938

### **In Living Union with God**

The first divine decree about man is that he should be in living union with God, and this union consists of living in God with the mind in the heart: thus anyone who aims at such a life, and still more anyone who participates in it to some extent, can be said to fulfil the purpose in life for which he was created. Those who seek this living union should understand what they are trying to do, and not be troubled at their lack of achievement in any specially important external feats. This work by itself embraces all other action.

St. Theophan the Recluse (1894)

## ***This and That***

The key to understanding the Western leftists' pathology: Since the Enlightenment they have been trying to escape the immutable givens of human nature and social conflict, to assert that mankind is on the trajectory of linear historical progress, and to demonstrate that human nature is capable of being corrected through politics, education, and indoctrination. Srda Trikovic

The German people are increasingly telling pollsters that they are not Christian. Of those who say they are Christian, there is a fairly even split between Protestants and Catholics, with less than 30 percent of Germans "identifying" as the former, and the same percentage as the latter. Those percentages are shrinking rapidly, and German Christians who actually attend church are but a fraction of those percentages. Most significantly, very few young people identify with any form of Christianity. (More to the point, there are very few young people, period. Germany has the lowest birthrate in the world, having just now defeated Japan in the Self-Loathing Sweepstakes.)

The five-plus million Muslims in Germany have no intention of assimilating. To what would they assimilate? A culture that has abandoned its center—the Christian Faith—has no basis for the cultivation of anything. It can only tear down; it cannot build up. For to build up liberalism is to engender indifference toward all meaning, all being, everything of actual value. How shall we sing the songs of Zion in a land that doesn't believe in Zion, or Jerusalem, or Jerusalem's Infant King?

Aaron D. Wolf, Chronicles

**The root of obedience is to listen, to hear. So to be obedient to God is to hear His voice and follow Him for He is good and the only lover of mankind. If we don't listen, then we fall into darkness, anger, despair and look increasingly into the abyss of nothingness putting our faith in lies. It is a seductive darkness calling us with a siren song that lulls us into belief that we have our own separate existence apart from God. The evil one's false promise that we shall be like gods has not changed. We still fall for it.**

Fr. Stephen Freeman

All of modern utopian visions are built on that lie from "buy this and you will be young and sexy" to "vote for me to be a solution for change or renewal or a better life or greatness". Never trust anyone who tells you he can build a better world. Who is he/she going to kill to make that happen?  
Listen to God, follow (obey) and you will live.

- Michael Baumann

... **For the Southerner**, God isn't some nameless deity, prepared to intervene at crisis points but otherwise uninvolved; he is a character of ordinary life, as present and real as a cousin or friend. Even today, when secularization has almost run its course in most of the rest of the country, the typical Southerner speaks of God as though he had been physically in the room only a minute ago.

"The South is by a long way the most simply and sincerely religious country that I was ever in," wrote the Scottish writer William Archer (himself an atheist) in 1910. "It is not, like Ireland, a priest-ridden country; it is not, like England, a country in which the strength of religion lies in its social prestige; it is not, like Scotland, a country steeped in theology. But it is a country in which religion is a very large factor in life, and God is very real and personal." What's striking about this passage is how, a century later, Ireland is no longer priest-ridden, no social prestige attaches to the Established (or any other) Church in England, and Scotland has completely rejected its theological inheritance. Yet for many Southerners, perhaps most, God is as imposingly present as he was in 1910.

"This appalls and frightens non-Southerners, especially academics, members of the news media, and Europeans, who blame the South's aboriginal religious attachments and "biblical literalism" for its backwardness and racial bigotry. Leave aside the fact that much of the last half-century's racial violence has occurred outside the South—without Christianity, without the intense forms of religious devotion for which Southerners are known, Southern racism would be far worse than it has been. The South's traversal, in the space of roughly 120 years, from race-based slave ownership to peaceful racial coexistence is nothing less than miraculous.

- Barton Swain

# The Self-Abasement of the Son of God

+ Archpriest Nikolai Deputatov (1971)

God, Who loves us more than we love ourselves, is prepared to do and give us anything. God, having prepared a blessed existence in the Heavens, and is leading us there by mysterious ways unknown in this life, came to us as a humble servant. The Lord came to correct the fall of Adam, brought about by his collusion with the devil. By correcting this, God destroys this connection and offers His Kingdom. While still in the pre-eternal Council of the Holy Trinity, the Son of God expressed His willingness to save humanity: "Behold I come to do Thy will, O Lord..." (Psalm 39).

The beginning of the self-sacrifice self-abatement of the Son of God is evidenced in the Incarnation. He wanted to hide the glory of His divinity under the mantle of humanity. Remaining under this mantle could have been glorious, but it was not what the Lord wanted. He wanted to lead a life of the most humble existence. Humankind cannot endure the occurrence of God. Nature itself cannot sustain the presence of God. Therefore, because of His great love of humankind, God extended the heavens like a veil of divinity, so that we would not perish. Just as God conceals Himself by the heavens that act as a veil, so the Son of God, having come to earth, hid His divinity under a mantle of human flesh, so that seeing God, we would remain living...

**The Lord was born in 'a manger' and grew up in poverty and toil. He lived in deprivation, not knowing where to find a place to rest. Thus He humbled Himself willingly, choosing this kind of life, with all its uncertainties.** He showed no resistance to whatever had come His way, but accepted everything as it came. As God, He was in control over all, and Himself could control the direction of His life, but He renounced His power, humbly accepting everything that happened to Him and was submissive to this. Only once did He interrupt this practice with the words "I am" as if to show He was impregnable to the approaching evil. But this was momentary, and only to show that He gave Himself willingly into the hands of His enemies. This was predetermined in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The Lord Himself called it obedience to the will of His Heavenly Father.

The Lord did not resist when death came, a degrading and fearful death at that. Submission to such a death is the utmost self-abasement. Death came like a clear realization of evil designs and volition of His adversaries. He knew all this beforehand in every detail, but did not resist anything and He willingly went to His death, a death contrived by envy and lies. His submission was not to people's malice, but to God's determination, worshipped in the Holy Trinity and expressed in the will of the Heavenly Father. The eminence that He attained as the Son, was proportionate to the depth of His self-humbling. Because He is omnipotent and unequalled, so in honoring the Father, He surpassed all, and not by coercion, but of His own free will. For humbling Himself so, even to death on the cross, God the Father so exalted Him that it would be impossible to surpass. He is exalted, not as God, but as Man.

This means that the human nature of Jesus Christ was introduced into the glory and power of the Divine Nature. Having humbled Himself, He not only did not forfeit what He had as God, but continued to exercise it as Man, showing us extreme humility and immeasurable love. "The Lord became Man with the purpose of having the opportunity to be in communion with humankind. His human body served as the instrument for this communion. The infinite and inaccessible God, by His goodness, having taken on human flesh, derogated Himself in unapproachable glory. He did this so that it would be possible for Him to unify with His visible creatures, and through this, the creatures in turn, could become partakers of the life of the divinity of God." ... St. Macarius of Egypt. The most perfect self-revelation of God to humanity is revealed in Christ, accessible to the consciousness and is very close, dear and comprehensible to the human heart. "He is the true God and eternal life" (1John 5:20), Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) so full and complete that "whoever

has seen Him, has seen the Father" (John 16:9). Also complete and perfect is the Revelation in Christ of the divine Truth and the Father's will for His people. The Savior had told the people "all that He heard from His Father" (John 15:15). He is "the Way, the Truth and the Life," and no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).

For us to be Christ-like is not an external duty, or the performance of a coercive demand and it does not consist of external repetitions of His actions and deeds. Before us is a free, living example of a religious and moral life in Christ, with the power of love for Him, as our Ideal, Redeemer and Savior. Without Christ, and outside communion with Him, we cannot do anything truly good (John 15:3). To love Christ, we are called to travel the inescapable path of self-denial. Through self-denial we inevitably come to terms with all adversity, sorrows, illnesses and misfortunes. And not only do we come to terms with these, but wholeheartedly and with gratitude, incessantly call upon the sweetest name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. With the name of Christ Jesus, spiritual beauty, joy and calmness enter our soul. In Him is God's Kingdom.

Let us not forget that we must incessantly turn to our Savior for guidance, support and help. He is the sole Teacher and Life Source. His influence extends to us, not only through learning but also through His meek and humble Being. The branch can only be fruitful, because of the vine from which it, itself, feeds. Human beings searching for spiritual fruits must live in Christ and be in constant communion with Him.

✠ ✠ ✠

### **St. Seraphim of Sarov ~ Conversation with N. Motovilov (excerpt)**

Under the pretext of education, we have reached such a darkness of ignorance that what the ancients understood so clearly seems to us almost inconceivable. Even in ordinary conversation, the idea of God's appearance among men did not seem strange to them. Thus, when his friends rebuked him for blaspheming God, Job answered them: How can that be when I feel the Spirit of God in my nostrils? (cf. Job 27:3). That is, 'How can I blaspheme God when the Holy Spirit abides with me? If I had blasphemed God, the Holy Spirit would have withdrawn from me; but lo, I feel His breath in my nostrils.'

In exactly the same way it is said of Abraham and Jacob that they saw the Lord and conversed with Him, and that Jacob even wrestled with Him. Moses and all the people with him saw God when he was granted to receive from God the tables of the Law on Mount Sinai. A pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, or, in other words, the evident grace of the Holy Spirit, served as guides to the people of God in the desert. People saw God and the grace of His Holy Spirit, not in sleep or in dreams, or in the excitement of a disordered imagination, but truly and openly.

We have become so inattentive to the work of our salvation that we misinterpret many other words in Holy Scripture as well, all because we do not seek the grace of God and in the pride of our minds do not allow it to dwell in our souls. That is why we are without true enlightenment from the Lord, which He sends into the hearts of men who hunger and thirst wholeheartedly for God's righteousness.

---

✠ "[St. Paisios replies to the statement 'One who has too high an opinion of himself cannot easily see the good in other people.'] Exactly. The person who has too high an opinion of himself remains in the fog of pride and has neither spiritual health nor spiritual vision, and is therefore unable to see the gifts or talents of others. But why should one think too much of himself? How will divine thoughts come into us, if we do not throw away our high opinion of ourselves? If Christ were to take a screwdriver and turn the small screw just a little, we would end up talking nonsense. What opinion then should we have of ourselves? He who has an exaggerated opinion of himself is beside himself — insane. He needs to come down and be grounded in reality, in order to discover himself. Otherwise, he will be wandering in the clouds — wasting his fuel in the air." — St. Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994)

## THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

By Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (+2003).

There is anguish when a woman is in labour, but all this is forgotten when the child is born, because a man has come into the world. Someone has come into the world to live, someone has entered into the realm of transitory life in order to grow into life eternal, and the birth of a child is always perceived as the beginning of life and as the beginning of eternity, once more incarnate, once more made real, visible, tangible, become part of human joy and human simplicity.

And yet, when we think of the nativity of Christ, the birth on earth of the Son of God, we see it in a quite different way.

One of the ancient miniatures representing the birth of the Lord, shows us, apart from the habitual features of a cave, of the Mother Virgin, of Joseph, of the familiar animals, the manger standing by, deposited on an altar of sacrifice. And the child is lying on it as probably Isaac laid on the altar which Abraham had built in order to bring him as a blood offering to the Lord. Every one of us is born through temporary life into eternal life; the Eternal One, He who is life itself, is born into the world in order to enter into the realm of death. Eternal, Immortal God enters into the realm of man, not

only the created world, but to enter the fallen world where death is the end of our earthly pilgrimage.

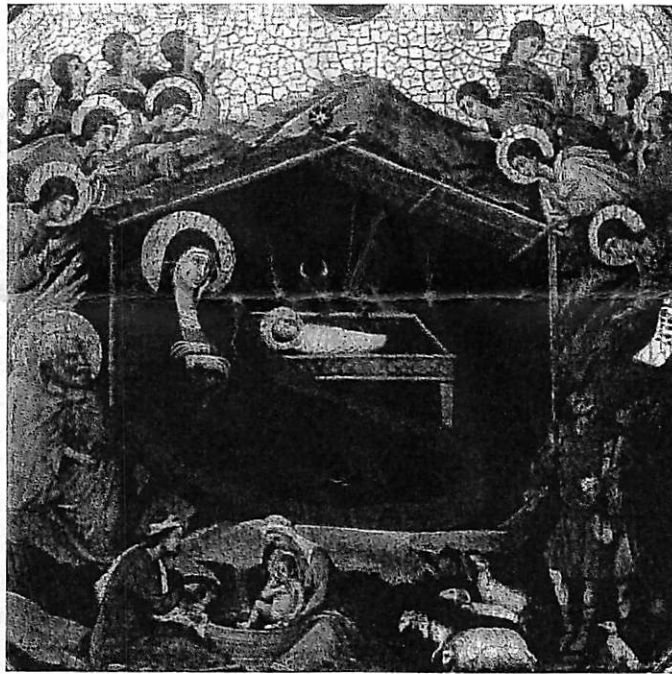
When we look at this image of the new-born child, lying on an altar of stones, ready for a sacrifice, brought as an offering, we can well ask ourselves, "Who is he who sacrifices this child?" And we have an answer: it is the Father who gives us His Son that through His death we may live. We see here incarnate, clearly expressed, divine Love, and the measure of this love divine. The Only-Begotten Son is given unto death, delivered unto death for our sakes. Saint Paul ponders on the event, and he exclaims: Hardly would anyone die for a friend, and Christ died for us while we still were enemies of God. [*But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* (Rom 5:8).]

God called us into existence, it was a one-sided act, not of His own powerful will, but of His immeasurable love. He

called us into existence, that we may share with Him not only existence, but life, become partakers of all that He is; we are called, in the words of Saint Peter, to become partakers of divine nature; we are called to be brethren and sisters of Christ, sons and daughters of the Living God. He created us in an act of love and in this act of love, from the first, He gave Himself as an offering to us. And this offering is always a sacrifice. In order to make this offering meaningful, He gave us freedom, the freedom to accept love and to reject love, to love Him in response to His love, or discard His love and, through our deeds, through all our attitude to Him and to life, to proclaim to Him that His love is of no avail to us, that we do not want it, that it is in vain that he has loved us first, it is in vain that He had loved us so much as to give His Only Begotten Son for us.

God gives us the freedom, and we ask very often, "Why?!"

Why have we not been made in such a way that, compelled by a blessed necessity, we would be unable to go wrong, that we should be made in such a way that we always and in all things would respond to the best. But is it not simply because where there is no freedom of love and rejection of love, there is no love? If we gravitated towards one another without any choice, it would be a law of nature, it would not be an act of free gift of oneself and of acceptance of the other. This freedom means love, at least the possibility of love, as it means also the possibility for us to reject



God. But God in His freedom does not reject us. He remains faithful to the last, perfectly generous, heroically faithful.

And when the freedom of man is misused, He uses His freedom to come to us, and to reach out towards us at the very depth of ourselves, at the extreme distance which we reach when we die to love. He enters this very realm which is the realm where there is no love, where there is only dividedness, brokenness and separation, both from God and from one another and within ourselves, the inner brokenness and conflict between mind and heart, between conscience and action: Christ is born into the realm of death we have made through the misuse of freedom, because we have forgotten that freedom culminates, is fulfilled in that love which gives itself perfectly, which is forgetfulness of self, which is the laying down of one's life for the other.

Let us then look at this crib not as we do when we are small children, seeing only an image of a child's birth, miraculous, wonderful; let us look at it with an earnest and adult gaze, and see that this crib is an altar of sacrifice, that this cave where He was born is an image of that cave in which He will be deposited, a young man, killed for God's sake after the agony of the Garden and the agony of the Cross, and let us ask ourselves, "Are we, each of us, a response to love revealed in such a way, revealed to such degree?" Will we find in ourselves a response, or shall we only say, "It was His choice, I have chosen against Him. He has chosen life for me, I have chosen death for Him."

Is that the answer which we will give? Oh, not in words, but in deeds, through our life, through our attitude to our own self, in which our own dividedness is not overcome, through our attitude to one another in which those people for whom Christ lived and died remain to us strangers, irrelevant and can be brushed out of our way, or through our attitude to Him Whom we do not treat as our ever-present invisible neighbor, for Whom we have no thought, no compassion, no charity, no love.

Or are we going to respond to this revelation of love in which the frailty of love is made visible, perceptible to us in the frailty of this little human body deposited on the straw of a crib, respond to the frailty of God by a mature love?

This is the question which now the day of Christmas sets before us, and we have days and months of liturgical unfolding of the year, to grow through it towards a definitive and final answer when we will see love sacrificed on Calvary. We have got this liturgical year to follow step by step, in this year we will discover how the saints of God have responded, and at every step the question will stand before us: "And what about you, what about thee personally, what about us in our togetherness, what is our answer to love?" Amen.



- Tell me, which has greater strength, water or fire?  
 - Uh ... water, Elder, answered a pilgrim.  
 - If we have a great fire, and you pour out a glass of water, will it be put out?  
 - No, Elder. The fire has greater strength.  
 - If you have a little fire, and you pour out a big can of water, will it be put out?  
 - Yes, Elder.  
 - It is neither water nor fire that has the greater strength, but the quantity. So it is also with spiritual things. If the worldly way of thinking prevails within you, that will overcome the spiritual. But if your mind is turned to the spiritual, it will overcome the carnal.

**Elder Ieronymos of Aigina (+1966)**

## THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST IS AT HAND

By St. John of Kronstadt.



Beloved, the Feast of the Nativity of Christ is now at hand. Let us take care to meet it in Christian manner, spiritually. I already know how you intend to meet it: you will soon be going to the market place, where you will concern yourselves and prattle about much, about the manifold pleasures of the table; or you will take care only to adorn your body with festive clothing. *But as for the one thing needful* (Lk 10:42), about how

to sweeten your soul for the coming feast with spiritual food, or about how to adorn your soul with luminous thoughts—in short, how to meet and spend the feast worthily—this but rarely comes to anyone's mind.

But, beloved, food is always with us and our clothing is always with us, but the Lord's feast is not always with us; therefore, let us concern ourselves not with food and clothing, but rather with preparing ourselves to meet our Most-Pure Heavenly King. Let us concern ourselves with meeting the approaching feast worthily and spiritually. We have long since been chanting *Christ is born*, which we chant in order to fathom beforehand the great mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, that is, why the Son of God descended to earth; why He was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, becoming man without ceasing to be God.

To what end? *To this end God descended to earth, that He might raise us to Heaven, says the Holy Church. (Akathist to the Sweetest Jesus, Kontakion 8.)* Remember this thought, and drive it into your hearts: that the Son of God descended to earth in order to save us from sin and eternal death and to raise us to heaven, that is, to where there is eternal life and eternal blessedness. If Christ descended to us in order to raise us to heaven, then we should ascend thereto beforehand in our thoughts and heartfelt desires, gradually turning our souls away from everything that binds us to the earth, to this country of exile in which there are so many temptations, afflictions, sicknesses, sorrows, with all its brevity, where we see only sin, allurements, and death with all its horrors.

Thus, before the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ arrives, let us adorn our souls with sobriety and purity of heart, that when Christ appears from heaven we might worthily meet His birth. Be attentive to yourselves: soon Christ will be on earth. Then raise your thoughts and hearts from earth to God and let us joyfully sing of the great mystery of the Nativity of the God-Man. If we meet this feast with such thoughts, and with such disposition of heart, then we will meet it worthily, in Christian manner, with benefit to our souls. Amen.

## “The Incarnate God gave us an incarnate Faith” - Fr. Stephen Freeman

...Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom 1:21)

This “darkening” describes the effects of a *communion* with the dark things of the world. The passions (gluttony, lust, love of money, anger, dejection, despondency, vainglory, pride), and the distorted vision of creation that they produce, gain their power when we enter into *communion* with them. Our thoughts can never be “objective” in such a situation. Rather, we see the world through filters – those of various passions that have now become united to us.

The incarnate God gave us an incarnate faith. The life of the sacraments and the actions that surround them, exist to teach our hearts to know God.

Most of the actions and rituals of the Orthodox life are quite simple. It requires approaching “things” as gifts from God. Everything in all of creation is icon and sacrament, a gift that bears the revelation of Christ, through Whom all things were made.

We have become “users” who see and judge things for what they are worth or for how they might benefit us. This is what consumers do. A consumer’s mind only sees things that may be consumed. We become like a cancer to the planet (and to ourselves).

The proper ritual of our lives begins and is grounded in thanksgiving for all things, and not simply for how they may serve us. Everything in God’s creation is created good and is thus a cause for giving thanks for its very existence. When anything is received as a gift, it carries with it the presence and remembrance of the Giver. All things become a means of communion, of knowing God. – Fr. Stephen Freeman

We teach the hands of a child to make the sign of the Cross, for it will be a primary weapon when he enters spiritual warfare. The very actions that have been vilified now for centuries (cf. “empty ritual”) are, in fact, essential to the Christian life. For if you do not engage in these holy forms of “play,” then the other games of your life, those of the Spirit of the Age, will teach your hands another form of warfare against Christ and His children. Ritual is not optional in the human life. Those of the marketplace and the entertainment world are quickly forming and shaping generations for something other than God. You cannot live such a life of cultural conformity and then wonder why you see no evidence for God.

This habit of denigrating the physical is the constant companion of most people in our culture. We bring it to our Orthodoxy as well, constantly looking for God in all the wrong places (our rational and emotional experience) rather than where He has deigned to meet us (the “Word become flesh”). The incarnate God gave us an incarnate faith. The life of the sacraments and the actions that surround them, exist to teach our hearts to know God.

Most of the actions and rituals of the Orthodox life are quite simple. It requires approaching “things” as gifts from God. Everything in all of creation is icon and sacrament, a gift that bears the revelation of Christ, through Whom all things were made. We have become “users” who see and judge things for what they are worth or for how they might benefit us. This is what consumers do. A consumer’s mind only sees things that may be consumed. We become like a cancer to the planet (and to ourselves). **The proper ritual of our lives begins and is grounded in thanksgiving for all things, and not simply for how they may serve us.** Everything in God’s creation is created good and is thus a cause for giving thanks for its very existence. When anything is received as a gift, it carries with it the presence and remembrance of the Giver. All things become a means of communion, a knowing of God.

- *Glory to God for All Things Blog*

# Bethlehem is in you!

What is it that makes "heaven and nature sing?" It is the miracle that the Son of God was born and became man. It is the "star of wonder, the star with royal beauty bright", which was seen in the sky, it is the "angels we have heard on high" that sang and it is the light which came from the humble manger, the light of love on that "holy and silent night"!

As Orthodox hymns tell the story of a saint or a holy event in the life of Christ, so do many of the Western Christmas carols relate the story of His birth. The words to one the beautiful Christmas carols speaks of a town: "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie..." The town of Bethlehem became an important city because it was where Jesus was to be born, "in Bethlehem of Judea," 2016 years ago.

"Where is Bethlehem?" Did the Son of God come to be born in a tiny hamlet in far off Palestine or was He to be born somewhere far closer to each of us? If Christmas represents God coming close to us, then, Bethlehem should be somewhere very close to us. Where is it, then? It is not far off at all. Bethlehem is in you. This is where Jesus came to be born in the manger of our Bethlehem, our heart. This is where He wants to be born. This is where He wants to live to bring us new life, the very life of God to you. If we celebrate each year a birth in Bethlehem and not in our heart, then we miss the whole meaning of Christmas.

Christmas was not just a starlit night in Bethlehem: it had been behind the stars forever. Christmas, must be in our hearts as it was in the heart of God, in His love, when He created the Earth, and then gave it away to us. When He sent the prophets, that was Christmas, too! And it was the most magnificent Christmas of all that night in Bethlehem when He gave His own Son, the ultimate Christmas gift, wrapped in swaddling clothes, "away in a manger".

As Jesus grew, Christmas was everywhere He went, giving food, giving sight and giving life. For Christmas is giving! When we give, there is someone to receive, making this a time of sharing. Scripture tells us, "As many as received Him, He gave to them power to become the sons of God." When we understand these words in relationship with Christ, we understand that receiving can be more important than giving at Christmas. When we receive Christ, we experience completely the gift of Christmas, with God giving and us receiving. "O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray: cast out our sin and enter in, be born to us today."

I ask again, "Where is Bethlehem?" It is in your hearts! Invite the Lord to come and receive Him to be born in your heart. We need Him there more than ever, especially during this time when our world is experiencing such great levels of anxiety or ordeals. The present state of our global economy ... and the ever-continuing presence of terrorism and civil strife. In the face of these tremendous ordeals and stress, we need to take comfort that our loving and Almighty God, also, took on all kinds of problems. The newborn Christ took on the ordeal of evil, sin and pain. He transformed these problems into hope, strength, peace and resurrection. In the midst of our difficulties we need to experience the joy of hope and love that Christ brings us, especially if He is born in our hearts. As we continue to count down the days to December 25<sup>th</sup>, remember it is love that makes Christmas a very special holiday and a holy day, bringing "joy to the world". May the joy and love of Christmas be with you all!

Fr. James Rousakis